

Marguerite was trembling violently. She could not command her voice to answer him. Her heart was whispering to her a secret—a secret that was filling her soul with shuddering horror.

Red Hand Colonel Symure's son! She could not credit the wild tale. The Colonel must be insane, and this was one of his delusions.

She raised her eyes, and fixed them on the white face before her. Her gaze was expressive of deep sympathy and sorrow.

"I know what you are thinking, mademoiselle," pursued the Colonel, sadly shaking his head; "but you are wrong in your suppositions. I am sane enough, thank heaven! Though, when you learn all I have gone through, the gnawing remorse which has been eating me up during the many past years, you will wonder how I have managed to retain my senses, how I am alive to-day. You know my secret, and you will keep it, I am sure; for I am not talking to a frivolous girl, to one who will repeat my story to every listening ear. I am trusting a woman full of honor and goodness—one who will lend me her wise and womanly counsel in this life's saddest strait."

Marguerite was wholly bewildered. She thought she was in a dream, and she was wishing that her father or one of the guests would come to her and arouse her.

"I see, mademoiselle, that you are much perplexed," he went on. "You cannot bring yourself to credit what I have told you—it is too terrible to credit, is it not? You cannot understand how I, Colonel Symure, am the father of Red Hand, the outlaw, eh? Well, it is a somewhat long story, but I shall relate it to you one day, ere long; but in the meantime, I would solicit your advice as to the manner I ought to act in order to snatch my son from all his guilt and misery. What would you do, had you a lost child, or brother, mademoiselle? Would you not move heaven and earth in order to get him back again? Where is he—where is he? Oh, if I could only discover his abiding place, I would crawl to it upon my bended knees. Ay, convict though he be, I would do that much, and more—much, much more, only to reach his side!"

After musing for a few seconds, Marguerite spoke as follows—"Come to me to-morrow, early, Colonel, and then we shall be able to converse freely upon this painful matter. Here there is danger of our being overheard by some one," she added, rising. "Remember! to-morrow, early."

And, waving her hand, Marguerite left him, crossed the *salon*, and mingled with her father's guests.

She tried to talk, but her tongue refused its office, and her voice seemed to have left her entirely. She sat down to the piano, and played—she knew not what, for the keys she touched uttered nothing but discord in her ears—wild, screeching, unearthly dissonance, which sent a thrill through her whole frame, and caused her brain to throb as it had never throbbed till now.

She looked around with troubled thoughts. In her sight, everybody and everything had suddenly become changed. How they had become so, she did not comprehend; she only felt that neither persons nor things appeared as they had appeared to her only one short hour ago.

She did not know that it was in herself alone that this alteration had taken place.

The rest of that evening was torture to Marguerite. She was longing to creep into the silence of her chamber, to be alone with her own harassing thoughts, which were bent on one object, on one object only.

Marguerite slept but little that night. Her pillow was as if made of thorns, she so tossed on it through the weary hours. In vain she closed her eyes and sought to woo repose. There was a face haunting her, a voice in her ears, that drove all slumber from her.

Until now, she had not dreamed of the state of her feelings, and it was with a shuddering terror that she learned to fully comprehend their state now.

She moaned, and pressed her fingers over her scorching eyeballs, feeling confused and unutterably wretched. She could hardly realize the events of the past evening; the Colonel's strange and unlooked-for revelation, and the woful knowledge that had flashed upon her mind.

"Well, brigand though he be, he has gentle blood in his veins," she exclaimed, within herself, seeking an excuse—one of the weakest in the world—for loving him.

Yes; Marguerite d'Auvergne loved Red Hand! She, a woman, well-born, beautiful, pure, and good, loved the bushranger—the man with a price set upon his erring, guilty head. She could no longer hide the fact from herself, and she did not attempt to do so.

No; she tore it forth and confronted it resolutely, saying to herself as she did so, "I must overcome this weakness, otherwise it will overcome me."

Then she laid her face in her hot palms, and felt how difficult was the task she had imposed upon herself. But prudence pointed out the path she ought to pursue, and she would endeavor to walk in that path. She knew that she would have to encounter much obstinacy of heart in this matter, that the feelings within her were not such as could be easily uprooted or thrust aside. How little she had been aware of her real state till now! Her eyes seemed to have been opened to it quite suddenly. What would her father say were he to become acquainted with her egregious folly—her madness? She, a d'Auvergne, to fix her affections on one whom she dared not name! Oh, heaven! there was distraction in the mere thought of such an act on her part.

But, thank heaven, none but herself had any knowledge of her sentiments, of the passionate throbbings in her bosom. Her love was a secret which must not be revealed, which must be hidden securely in the inmost depths of her soul. There was some consolation in the assurance that none could reflect on her folly. Whatever she might have to endure, she would have to endure alone. She did not require any sympathy, any confidence. Marguerite must silently bear the great trouble she had pulled upon her own head.

Had Marguerite had a mother, matters might have been otherwise with her. For between daughter and father, no matter how dearly they may love each other, there never can exist the same entire confidence as between daughter and mother. Women thoroughly understand women's feelings—their best feelings—and it is only natural that the daughter should unveil her bosom's secrets to that parent who most resembles and comprehends herself.

At an early hour on the following day, according to appointment, Colonel Symure came to Casurina Villa. He was received by Marguerite, who was looking much paler than her wont, wearing an air of excessive weariness and misery.

But her visitor did not note her appearance in the least: his mind was too full of thoughts of his son, to pay much observance to any other subject.

It was with amazement that he listened to Marguerite's intelligence respecting Red Hand; to her graphic account of how her father and herself became acquainted with the dashing outlaw, his friendly treatment of them, and lastly, his late hazardous visit to Sydney in the open face of day.

"And you gave my boy an asylum on that terrible night when he was being hunted by the agents of the law?" the officer exclaimed. "Heaven bless you, mademoiselle, for that act! Some strange power drew me towards you, and unresistingly I yielded to that power, and made you acquainted with my grief. And now will you aid me in finding his abiding-place? I must seek him, and, making myself known to him, as far as I can, exert a parent's influence over him and endeavor to snatch him from this lawless, perilous, sinful life of his. In what part of the country did you encounter the unhappy man?"

"At a place called Snake Gully, some two-and-twenty miles hence, beyond Parramatta. That is all that I can tell you, all the clue I can give you to his probable whereabouts."

"But Monsieur d'Auvergne might possibly be able to afford me further information concerning him. You say that your father resided with Red Hand for several days; such being the case, monsieur can, doubtless, describe the locale of his abode, and how I could discover it. Come! What say you?"

Marguerite hesitated for some seconds. "Papa must not be trusted in this affair," she said, decidedly. "In many ways it would be unadvisable to seek his assistance; it is needless to explain wherefore, since he is in the employ of Government, and consequently is not quite the master of his own actions."

"I understand—I understand."

"If I were a man, now—"

"You would aid me?"

"Ay, with my whole heart and soul would I!" she answered, earnestly.

The Colonel seized Marguerite's hand fervently.

"What is to be done, mademoiselle; can you not advise me what to do?" he cried.

"It is difficult to give counsel in this matter. I have heard my father say that it would be next to an impossibility to find out Red Hand's home. The police have long been endeavoring to do so, but all their seeking in this respect has been vain: Red Hand's retreat is naturally protected in many ways; and, stranger as you are to him, you would risk much in seeking to penetrate the mysteries of that retreat."

"Yet must I do so at every hazard."

"You must go unattended, remember."

"Yes, yes, I comprehend," nodded the Colonel. "I can go in the mail-coach, or by the boat, as far as Parramatta; thence, after asking my way to Snake Gully, I must make my quest on foot, and alone."

Marguerite shook her head gravely.

"I do not wish to discourage you in the least, but I must say that I do not anticipate any successful result to attend your enterprise."

"Nevertheless, it must be made—I feel it must. I should go distracted quite, were I not to make every effort in my power to save him. I have a duty before me—a parent's duty—which I must lose no time in endeavoring to perform to the very utmost of my power. Listen to my tale, and then judge how much I am deserving of all good men's condemnation. Ah! far greater sinner am I than he the outlaw! On my unhappy, guilty head heaven has hurled a just, but terrible vengeance! Listen."

And as briefly as possible Colonel Symure narrated to Marguerite the history of his life. He hid nothing, neither did he attempt to excuse anything he had done. He told her a plain and truthful tale, and left her free to blame him as he merited.

CHAPTER XXIX.

Colonel Symure reached Snake Gully early on the following day, and then he thoughtlessly plunged into the bush, and made his onward way.

In his travelling-wallet he had a flask of brandy and a few biscuits; and thus scantily provided, he commenced his most wild and dangerous quest after the hapless Desmoro.

The Colonel being a stranger in the colony, was also a stranger to the bush and all its perils. Heedlessly he journeyed on; plunging out of one thicket into another, wading across creeks, climbing high cliffs, struggling through gorges, tearing his way onwards, wholly ignorant of whither his steps might lead him in the end.

For three hours the Colonel pursued his useless search; then, overcome by the heat, and faint from fatigue of both body and mind, he sat down by a narrow stream, and sought to refresh himself by a slight rest, a biscuit, and a sip from his brandy flask.

He leant his back against the foot of a giant woollybush, around whose trunk clung ponderous clusters of staghorn fern, and looked up at the blue heavens, seen at intervals through the vaulted foliage. It was a spot of peculiar beauty, verdant and cool, where the grassy-leaved vines twisted themselves from tree to tree, from branch to branch, festooning each and all with flowery garlands.

The Colonel felt drowsy, and gradually slumber stole upon him, and softly sealed his eyelids.

He had but little repose on the night preceding, and now exhausted nature yielded to necessity, and he slept soundly.

The Colonel did not awake until the sun had sunk, and gloom was gathering around.

He rubbed his eyes, and started up in some alarm. He was vexed with himself for having thus permitted sleep to overcome him, for having been beguiled to waste his precious time, and he was wondering in what direction he should turn his steps before blinding darkness should entirely shroud the scene.

Look whichever way he would, he could see nothing but the thick and interlacing branches of trees. Which way should he turn? Alas! he knew not, for he was surrounded quite by inextricable confusion and perplexity.

His heart sunk in his breast. He was a soldier; nevertheless, he was quite capable of feeling fear.

He had never reflected upon the possibility of losing himself in the bush; but he was now just beginning to think that he might not be able to retrace his way, and that the growing darkness might overtake him, and keep him where he was until morning.

He did not like his position, so he tore onward, but without any positive hope of being able to free himself from the entanglement around him.

Meanwhile the gloom quickly thickened (the twilight is of short duration in these latitudes), and the Colonel, unable to proceed further, sank down in utter despair.

He was benighted, and he had only to make the best of that fact. Of course he did not feel inclined to sleep now, having already been refreshed by a long slumber. Nevertheless, he stretched himself at full length, having no thought of native dogs, of snakes, or any other noxious reptiles, or savage animals.

Weary, weary hours were these to Colonel Symure; but, appalling as was his position, he could not alter it in any way.

Towards morning he fell into an uneasy sleep, from which he awoke stiff and shivering. And again he partook of some biscuit; but, alack! where, where was he to procure a draught of cool water?

He had left the margin of the creek, and knew not in which direction he could regain it. His lips and throat were parched, and he was longing to lave his tired limbs in some limpid stream.

He strode onwards. He had no idea whither. He was only hoping for the best, and praying that heaven would assist him, and lead his wandering steps into the right path.

On, and on, and on he went for two long hours; yet the scene was in nowise changed. To his right and to his left, behind him and before him, there was nothing but the bush, the apparently interminable bush, and no sight whatever of water.

The Colonel wrung his hands, and asked himself what he was to do. Thrice he raised his voice and called aloud, but there came no answer to his cry save what a mimicking gobbora sent him out of a neighboring gum-tree.

He looked around, hoping to find something that would quench his burning, maddening thirst, and seeing some native currants, he at once pounced upon them, and was much refreshed by their tart juice.

Then forward once more he proceeded, measuring miles and miles, yet making no visible alterations in his immediate surroundings.

He looked at his watch, but as he had neglected to wind it up on the preceding evening, it had stopped. As far as he was able to guess, it was now about four o'clock, p.m.

He was waxing hungry, and his biscuits were all gone.

Hungry, thirsty, aweary both in mind and body, and lost in the bush! Truly, Colonel Symure was in a most terrible position. But he did not entirely give way—he still travelled on, not continually in one direction, but first to this point, and then to the other. Too late, he perceived the folly and danger of his undertaking, and too late he regretted it.

By-and-by, utterly exhausted, he threw himself on the earth, and moaned aloud. He was faint and sick—fairly famishing for lack of food and water. He looked about for some more native currants, but he saw none, and he had no strength to search further for them.

The sun had been intensely hot all the day, and the air was stifling. But Colonel Symure felt nothing but the great gnawing at his vitals, the scorching, maddening thirst that was his.

The shadows of eve were approaching, and

the wanderer lay stretched on the ground in a state of half-stupor.

And so another and another night passed away, and afterwards another day broke upon the world.

The Colonel rose and crawled away, once more in quest of native currants; but he could find none, nothing that was eatable; so he gave up the search, and laid himself down to die, as he thought.

He grew quite lightheaded, and then he lost all memory of where he was, and of everything else beside. Thus he lay the whole of another night, and the following morning found him near to his end—speechless, insensible, and seeming scarcely to breathe.

And all this while he was close to food and water—close to Desmoro's retreat, and knew it not. The rivulet, by the margin of which he had stopped to rest during his first day's journey, was a continuation of that same creek which flowed in front of the bushranger's dwelling. From first to last, the Colonel had done nothing but walk over and over the self-same ground; and it was fortunate that he had done so, else he would have been out of all reach of succor from the friendly hands of one whom Providence led to the spot where the starving man was lying, apparently breathing his last.

When Colonel Symure reopened his eyes to consciousness, a strange and unexpected scene met his amazed gaze. He was in a lofty and spacious cavern—a sort of domed apartment—lying on a rude couch, made luxuriously soft and comfortable with opossum rugs. At a short distance from him was seated a man, stitching away at some masculine garment or other, apparently deeply absorbed in his task.

The Colonel did not move, or utter a sound. He was too much astonished to do either one thing or the other. He was looking about him, and examining his unknown companion, who presented a somewhat strange appearance, being habited in garments much too large for his lank and angular figure. His face wore an expression of melancholy and of restless anxiety: he appeared to be always on the alert, always listening, as if in expectation of the arrival of some one.

After watching the man for some time, the Colonel turned round on his couch. The noise he made in so doing aroused his companion, who rose at once, and approached the soldier.

"Where am I?" demanded the latter.

"Yer was almost dead when yer was brought here, yer was, mister," was the evasive reply.

"And now look at yer, as brisk as a bee, perty nigh."

"I ask you where I am."

"Lor, so yer did, mister! But it's a 'markable fact that I dunno where I myself is. Ah! yer may stare, mister; but, as sure as eggs is eggs, I've told yer the truth!"

"I don't understand you," returned the gentleman, in the utmost perplexity.

"Ah, I don't wonder at that! There's a precious good deal in the world that I don't understand!"

"How came I here? Perhaps you will be kind enough to elucidate that mystery for me?"

"Yer was brought here, mister."

"So much I presume, since I did not bring myself here."

The man made no reply, but, filling a pannikin with some sort of drink, presented it to the Colonel.

"What is it?" asked he.

"Groot, it's called," answered the man, in a self-satisfied tone; "and real good stuff it is for any one that's sick," added he. "There's lots of sugar in that bag, mister,"—pointing to a sugar-bag near at hand—"and ye're quite welcome to it, I can tell yer."

"Thank you—thank you! What's your name?"

"Neddy, sir!"

"Neddy—what?"

"Nothink else, sir!"

"You are driving me nearly crazy with all this evasion!" burst forth the Colonel. "Tell me—tell me where I am!" he continued, in excited syllables.

"Take care—take care, Colonel Symure, I beg!" spoke a strange voice at this moment; and following these words, appeared a form of almost herculean build—a form owning a face of great manly beauty.

The Colonel started, and uttered a sharp cry—a cry of astonishment and joy.

"Aha, you remember me, my good friend!" said the new-comer, in accents full of gentleness. "I also remembered you the very instant my eyes fell upon your face. 'This is the man who befriended me!' cried within myself. Now let me repay for all we did for me. And I picked you up, flung you across my shoulders, and brought you to my chateau, which I hope you admire, eh?"

"You are Red Hand?"

"Behold the sign!" rejoined the other, holding up his crimson palm. "You recollect me?"

"I do, Desmoro Desmoro!"

"Eh? Where learned you my own name?" queried the bushranger, in considerable surprise.

"Where learned you mine?"

"A question for a question! Very well, Colonel," laughed Red Hand. "I searched your pockets, and made myself fully acquainted with their contents, amongst which were two letters addressed to Colonel Symure, which I remembered to be your title."

At this point, Neddy disappeared to attend to his several domestic duties, and the soldier and the bushranger, the father and son, were left alone together.